



ARTICLE

Informal Sperm Donation in Russia

Irina G. Polyakova

Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia

ABSTRACT

Rising infertility across the globe has created a growing demand for assisted reproductive technologies (ART). In recent years, apart from sperm donation in formal settings such as fertility clinics, informal donation practices have emerged and spread across Russia. These reproductive donation practices have become possible due to the development of social networks and private online platforms. We conducted a pilot study (eleven semi-structured interviews) of the informal sperm donation in Russia and analysed donor-recipient interactions, donors' expectations and experiences of finding recipients online. We focus on donors' motivations and on the meanings, which donors invest in this practice that consumes significant resources on their part (medical tests and artificial insemination costs, travel and accommodation expenses, sometimes mutually agreed financial support of future offspring). We interpreted the practices that coalesced around informal donation from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, because it allowed us to showcase how actors reflected on and formulated the meanings of their actions in the absence of externally imposed rules (legal regulations, established moral conventions). Since informal donation practices do not fit into the traditional schemes of interpretation, such research requires the actors involved in informal donation either to create their own schemes or to modify the existing conceptual frames in creative ways. The study shows that informal donors do not only provide their genetic material but also spend time and invested considerable resources to ensure their procreation, including eventual financial support of the child. At the same time, these men are not interested in marital relations or paternal relations with their offspring. Thus, the informal sperm donors do not associate the parental project with traditional family and its values. We conclude

Received 3 June 2021

Accepted 24 September 2021

Published online 11 October 2021

© Irina G. Polyakova

irinapolykova@yandex.ru

that ART engendered a new phenomenon, which might be described as extramarital reproduction. Assisted reproduction outside marriage gains footing in Russia and requires more detailed further study.

KEYWORDS

sperm donation, informal sperm donation, assisted reproductive technologies, extrafamilial reproduction, donor motivation, online platforms for reproduction

Introduction

Rising infertility across the globe has created a growing demand for assisted reproductive technologies (ART). According to the Russian Association of Human Reproduction (RAHR), about 12% of In vitro fertilization (IVF) cycles use donated material such as sperm, oocytes and embryos. Sperm donation is one of the most widely used and well-known assisted reproductive technology; it is also the least traumatizing for the donor. In the last decades, there has been an international trend towards open-identity gamete donation (sperm and oocytes), with the corresponding changes in legal regulations (Blyth & Frith, 2009). In Sweden, the UK and Netherlands, after coming of age, a donor-conceived child has the right to receive identifying information about the biological father. The requirement to disclose the information about the donor's identity has led some donors to seek greater discretion in informal settings. Apart from protecting donors' anonymity, informal settings open greater freedom to donors who might not be vetted for donation by fertility clinics.

In Canada, for example, even though the so-called home insemination is regulated by a number of legislative acts, there still remains enough room for legal ambiguities and complexities, resulting in lawsuits and litigations. The birth of a donor-conceived child does not imply any legal obligations on the part of the donor unless the sperm was donated through sexual intercourse. In this case, the donor is given a year after the child's birth to claim his parental rights (Kelly, 2009; Kelly, 2010).

Health Canada even published materials warning of the potential dangers of using sperm from online donors (Health Canada, 2011). The emergence of online platforms offering sperm donor matching services enables donors and recipients to dodge the rules of fertility clinics but raises a number of ethical and legal concerns (Ravelingien et al., 2016).

In Russia, according to the Order No. 803H *O poriadke ispol'zovaniia vspomogatel'nykh reproduktivnykh tekhnologii, protivopokazaniakh i ogranicheniakh k ikh primeneniui* [On the procedure of the use of assisted reproduction technologies, contraindications and limitations of their application] issued by the Ministry of Health on July 31, 2020, men aged 18–35, physically and mentally healthy, have the right to be sperm donors after undergoing medical screening and genetic testing. Sperm donors can be anonymous as well as non-anonymous (*O poriadke ispol'zovaniia*, 2020). The Order came into force on 1 January 2021. To facilitate the procedure of donor selection, it is advised to compile a list of donors with the information about their

appearance (height, weight, eye colour, hair colour, etc.) and results of their medical and genetic tests, their race and nationality. The Order specifies that in any case, only the use of cryopreserved donated sperm is permitted after repeated negative results of the *treponema pallidum* antibody test, test for IgG and IgM antibodies to HIV-1 or HIV-2, and test for antibodies to hepatitis C and B virus (O poriadke ispol'zovaniia, 2020).

In recent years, apart from sperm donation in formal settings (in fertility clinics and similar institutions), informal donation practices have emerged and spread in Russia¹. This phenomenon, however, remains largely underexplored in Russian research literature although in other countries the questions of online informal sperm donation have been in the focus of scholarly attention for quite a long time (see, for example, Ripper, 2008). In the last decade, this phenomenon was widely researched across different countries and contexts. A research team from the Netherlands created a taxonomy of reasons for sperm donation in formal and informal settings, comparing the possible reasons for and against sperm donation conducted via medical institutions or through direct donor-recipient contacts (Bossema et al., 2014). A large-scale British survey focused on men registered as sperm donors after donor anonymity was abolished in the UK (Freeman et al., 2016). A large Australian study of sperm donors identified the characteristics of donors that correlated with their willingness to act as donors in the context of identity-release legislation in Australia, Canada, the UK and USA (Riggs & Russell, 2011). Lavoie and his colleagues discuss the experience of Canadian donors offering their services online (Lavoie et al., 2018).

In this article, we are going to discuss the informal practices of online sperm donation in Russia, focusing on donors' perceptions of the process. The donors we interviewed treat this process with the utmost seriousness and invest into it a large amount of time and money: they study the medical and legal aspects of ARTs, undergo regular medical check-ups and screening tests, travel to other cities to meet potential recipients, create and maintain their own websites or groups in social media where they advertise their services and publish easy-to-understand materials on assisted reproduction.

In our study, we discuss different aspects of donor-recipient interactions, but we focus primarily on donors' motivations and their expectations concerning potential recipients as well as their evaluations of donor-recipient relationships. The article aims at shedding light on donors' motivations and the meanings that sperm donors ascribe to donation, given the fact that these donors invest significant time and resources in their activity.

Methodology

In our sampling and selection of informants, we focused on the outstanding group of individuals. After the quantitative survey of sperm donor motivations was completed online in October 2019 (Polyakova, 2020), a group of 24 men who reported uncommon donation practices were discovered. While having various social and

¹ These practices rely on online platforms such as <http://donorspermi.ru/>, <https://mama-poisk.ru/>, <https://alldonors.ru/>, <https://rebenku.biz/>.

demographic traits, these individuals showed greater involvement and expertise in reproductive donation. First, they were well informed about the details of ART procedures; they have passed all the necessary medical tests or were ready to renew them upon first request; they were registered under several nicknames or had their own websites/accounts in social media devoted to reproductive donation; they published online photographs of their children, parents and other kin; they preferred artificial insemination and IVF to conception via intercourse; they were willing to travel to other cities to meet the recipient woman and to cover all the expenses; they were ready to cover the expenses of the IVF procedure and to support the mother and future child financially.

These individuals were invited to participate in an in-depth interview. Some of these individuals declined the invitation or stopped responding in the course of preliminary negotiations and scheduling. Those who accepted the invitations were interviewed via Skype² (7), in person (2), and replied via emails (2).

The research on this topic in various countries, in one way or another, deals with the same set of questions: Who are sperm donors? What are their motivations for donating sperm and why do they choose to do it via the Internet? What method(s) of insemination do they prefer? How do they prepare for donation? What are their expectations regarding the contact with the recipients? How many of them have donated their sperm? Do they maintain contact with the recipients and resulting children? (Freeman et al., 2016).

The interview guide was designed in accordance with Jane Agee's recommendations (Agee, 2009): we started with the question types that she recommends, followed by additional questions that called for a more extended response with biographical details or a more detailed discussion of specific aspects. All responses have been anonymized and transcribed. We used categorization analysis to earmark and typologically distribute motives and practices of reproductive behaviour reported by the informants.

In total, we interviewed 11 men, aged 28–53 (mean age is 35.67). Only one respondent had no higher education (vocational secondary education), two respondents held two higher education diplomas and two other respondents held a degree above the bachelor level. Most respondents were from Moscow, others were from Ufa, Nizhny Novgorod, Krasnodar, Yekaterinburg and Chelyabinsk. As for the respondents' professional background, there was an electrician, a lawyer a medical practitioner, two R&D specialists, two IT specialists, two academic researchers, and two entrepreneurs. All respondents were heterosexual, four were officially married, seven had children born from a relationship. According to the respondents' own assessments, the majority were middle-income and only three had a high income.

Conceptually, our study relies on the symbolic interactionism theory, which allowed us to show how actors formulate and realize the meanings of their actions in the absence of external rules imposed on them by social institutions (Goffman,

² Skype is a registered trademark of the Microsoft group of companies.

1974). Since informal donation practices do not fit into the traditional schemes of interpretation, such research requires the actors involved in informal donation either to create their own schemes or to modify the existing conceptual frames in creative ways. We believe that the theoretical approach from the perspective of symbolic interactionism is the most productive in this respect, since it takes as a point of departure the fact that people relate to events depending on the meanings they ascribe to these events; that these meanings are generated in the process of communication and interactions between the actors involved; and that, nevertheless, these meanings depend on each actor's individual interpretations (see Lavoie et al., 2018; Poupart, 2011). In our case, communication between the actors—donors and recipients—takes place online and depends, on the one hand, on the motivations and life stories of the people involved in the process and, on the other hand, on their mutual expectations and the agreements they reach with each other.

While symbolic interactionism helped us on the microlevel, it was *The Transformation of Intimacy* by Anthony Giddens (1992) that was the most illuminating for interpreting the emergence of informal online sperm donation on the macrolevel. In his study of 1992, Giddens demonstrates that major social transformations including women's entry into the paid workforce and technological advances, such as effective contraception, gave women greater control of their lives and of their bodies. As a result, sexual relations were emancipated from the familial social control and the reproductive function within the family. Sex could be "pure" pleasure unburdened of risks of unplanned pregnancy and social opprobrium. On the other hand, late modern familial relations evolved into the search for strong emotional connection and sexual fulfillment ("pure relationships") rather than—as previously—being strongly dependent on material constraints and social expectations of formal marriage for any "mature" individual. With the development of ART and media communications in the last decades, human reproduction may, as we hypothesize, make another step in this process of functional differentiation in the intimate sphere: reproduction and child-rearing can become separate from both sexual and familial relations. We use the notion of extramarital reproduction to describe these new realities of seeking reproductive partners online and building certain relationships with the recipients and future offspring without entering into formal or informal marital relations with the reproductive partners.

Private Sperm Donors and the Internet

Most respondents answered the question why they decided to become online sperm donors by saying that it was fast, easy and cheap or, as one of the respondents put it, "you wouldn't expect me to place an ad in a newspaper, would you?" The respondents find it particularly important to be able to meet the mother of their future child: "I'd like to know in what conditions my child will be living in, whom he or she will look like, what he or she will wear—you can tell all this immediately just by looking at the woman". The majority of donors point out that they can stop online communication at any

moment if they choose to. It should be noted that four respondents have their own websites or have formed special groups online. The most interesting is the case of donor D., whose site, apart from his own photographs and a detailed description of the donor-recipient interaction procedure, includes photos of his parents and of over 20 children he fathered. The site also contains a section on embryos resulting from successful IVFs of different women and photos of these women. There are about 15 comments and responses from the women who used D.'s services and tips on the choice of a sperm donor, the information about IVF, the influence of genes on offspring and so on.

Despite such extensive coverage of his services and related aspects, D. admitted that sometimes he faces problems in his interactions with potential recipients: "Only one out of the thirty women who wrote to me was actually ready for IVF and ready to become a mother of my child, the rest just wasted my time", he says. Some donors mentioned that many women who register on such websites actually do not do it in good faith: "There are women and not just a few of them who are looking for husbands, which seems strange to me, because it's not a dating website, after all"; "Many women put in some ridiculous demands, you wouldn't believe it, but they claimed what they were looking for was a well-to-do, unmarried man with no children. I understand that it's a serious business but in the few months that I have been on this site I keep seeing the same faces. What does it say to you? Time goes by but nothing comes of it"; "A clear and straightforward description of the woman's expectations is always preferable to hints and innuendos, but it is the latter what you normally get". On the other hand, one of the donors, who created a woman's account on such website, described his experience in the following way: "You get a lot of halfwits looking for sex adventures or those who themselves haven't the slightest idea of what they are looking for".

Our interviewees also admitted feeling exposed to a competitive environment when they offer their services online. In order to attract attention, donors often describe their ancestors' achievements: "I have a good ancestry, my ancestors were scientists, engineers, state officials, entrepreneurs, famous military commanders and other respectable people. Longevity runs in my family. Moreover, we have always sought to work for the good of our country and people". Some donors also post information about their health status, hobbies, interests, skills and other strengths: "I am a civilized, cultured and well-rounded, educated person (biochemist). I don't have any bad habits or addictions or a propensity to form bad habits. I am employed in the medical sphere, have a lot of interests and hobbies, in particular I am interested in science, technology, and robotics, I have an active, healthy lifestyle"; "I am by no means a couch potato, sitting in front of a telly surrounded by beer cans. I play bass, I play an ordinary guitar and percussion, I used to play in a local music band. I am good with hands and can do just about any job that needs to be done around the house such as repairing household appliances or build a house"; "I have contributed to many successful conceptions, the resulting children are all healthy and good-looking; when they grow up, they will be successful and positive people, just like their biological father".

Medical Aspects

All of our respondents claimed that they enjoy good health, do not smoke and seldom drink alcohol. Three of them practice sport from time to time, all the others do it on a regular basis: “I have an active and healthy lifestyle in all seasons—volleyball, cycling, jogging, swimming, skiing, snowboarding”; “I practice sport: fitness, swimming, tennis, I have recently started learning to play golf”; “I used to box, to do martial arts and now I am into yoga”.

All respondents pay much attention to the safety of sperm donation and agree that a preliminary medical check-up is necessary. The respondents either claim that they have up-to-date medical test results necessary for donation or that they are ready to renew them on first demand: “I am healthy, free of infection, and fertile; I am ready to show all the necessary documents”; “I have all the necessary medical tests, including a karyotype test, PCR swab test, spermogram, rhesus negative blood, which means that my sperm is suitable for all women who want to have a healthy baby, blood group O, the most common blood type”. A similar attitude to matters of safety and health is expected of the potential recipients. Almost all our interviewees pointed out that they do not consider women with bad habits (especially smoking): “To improve your chances to have a healthy baby I think both of us need to go through a medical check-up (I hope you understand why)”. All donors are particularly attentive to questions of genetics, in particular “good genetics”.

Only two men are ready to consider conception through intercourse: “Natural conception is possible provided there is mutual attraction and we both go through a full medical examination at a trustworthy medical centre. For me artificial insemination is an easier option”. These respondents also point out that for them, sex as such is not a goal: “I am not looking for sex on the side, I have no problem with this”; “I use a contactless method—artificial insemination or IVF. In other words, I am not trying to satisfy my sexual needs”. Others prefer artificial insemination conducted at home or IVF in a medical clinic. Almost all donors feel positive or neutral about IVF, claiming that “it is the end result that matters, not the means to achieve it” and that “it’s” up to the woman to decide”. Nevertheless, our respondents feel uncomfortable with the formal IVF procedure since it requires them to provide their personal data and sign the documents, therefore disclosing their identity. Staying anonymous is a crucial requirement for many of them. Several of our respondents reported the difficulties they faced in the process: if a man acts as a non-anonymous donor, he has to pass all the necessary medical examinations and tests, including “quarantining” of their donated sperm for six months and repeated testing afterwards. Thus, it takes a long time before the actual procedure is performed. If the recipient woman is single, she can introduce the donor as her boyfriend but in this case, he would have all the rights and obligations in relation to the resulting child, which is something not all women are ready for as well as the donors themselves. One of the donors shared his experience of cooperation with a married couple: “I just turned up at a clinic with her husband’s documents and said that I am her husband and nobody suspected anything”. This situation is not surprising since this couple had been looking for and found a donor that would look like the husband.

Donation Experience and Donors' Expectations of Recipients

Potential donors may have various expectations concerning the desired recipients. Four of our respondents consider only single heterosexual women. These men also impose additional requirements, including the woman's family, her age, financial status, appearance, habits, and life style: "I am looking for a non-smoking, confident woman, with natural beauty (no botox, silicone, especially huge silicone lips), preferably with income not lower than average for conceiving one or two babies"; "There are little chances that our acquaintance and communication will come to something if you already have a husband and/or a permanent partner—I want to be the child's sole father"; "I am looking for a down-to-earth woman without bad habits. She should be registered in Moscow or Moscow region and she should have a place of her own for the child to live in".

Three other donors, on the contrary, are interested only in heterosexual married couples as a guarantee that the child will be living in a traditional full family and will be well provided for: "A child is not a toy, which is why family couples are desired"; "I am not a fan of fatherlessness and I am not thrilled at the prospect of my children living somewhere without my help or supervision", "I have to be sure that the child will have everything he or she needs and a full family". Other respondents are less demanding and are ready to cooperate with a heterosexual or a homosexual couple or a single woman. The majority of our respondents (eight out of eleven) claimed that mutual attraction is necessary for donation; one of them thinks that "it is necessary to reach some agreements". Interestingly, he is now engaged in negotiations with a potential recipient and has no previous experience of donation.

Seven out of eleven donors claim that they already have children conceived by donor insemination and four already have fathered 10 children or more. Two respondents have previously donated their semen to sperm banks and received remuneration. At the moment of the survey one of the respondents has already passed the upper age limit and is no longer eligible as a donor for sperm banks, another has landed a good job and ceased to depend on financial compensations for donating sperm. Nevertheless, both of them continue offering sperm donations online. Interestingly, they do not require "mutual attraction", the only thing that they insist on is their anonymity. One more respondent is now undergoing a medical examination at a clinic in order to be able to donate sperm to sperm banks. He commented that it is a really lengthy process. The majority of our respondents are unwilling to donate in a formal setting because of the lengthy period of waiting for the test results to arrive and because of much red tape. Moreover, to them the whole process seems "sterile and impersonal" and one of the respondents commented: "I simply can't stand hospitals".

Interactions between the Actors Involved in the Donation Process

Most interviewees have said that the process of conception takes time, it also requires a lot of discipline, punctuality and tact: "I would like to make this very awkward moment easier for the woman as much as I can; it's a very personal thing"; "I understand that for a successful conception regular meeting are necessary on certain days for

several months and I am committed to ensuring the desired result, I am responsible and punctual as far as agreements are concerned". Six respondents are ready to travel to a recipient woman's city at their own expense in order to make the process of conception for her as convenient and comfortable as possible. Five respondents are planning to support the mother and the resulting offspring financially or are already doing so. One is ready to cover the IVF expenses or have already done so.

All of the respondents replied negatively to the question as to whether they are ready to marry the mother of their future child. As it was mentioned above, many of them prefer to deal with couples rather than single women. Nevertheless, almost all of the respondents had difficulty in answering the question about their relationship with the woman's husband or partner. The husband takes part in decision-making, approves or disapproves of the donor candidates, in some cases ensures the woman's security in face-to-face negotiations. There is normally no informal communication between the husband and the sperm donor, which is not surprising, because the fact that the woman has a heterosexual partner automatically excludes any possibility of the donor's further communication with the mother or the child. At the same time, the woman's partner in a homosexual couple is perceived by the respondents in the same way as the recipient woman herself. Both donors who had an experience of dealing with same-sex female couples observe that such couples are easier to engage with, "maybe because two women together are less afraid".

Most donors reported having some negative experience of dealing with potential recipients via e-mail, telephone or in face-to-face communication. For example, they mention the bizarre behaviour of some potential recipient women: "I asked her what time would be most convenient for my visit to her city so that we could meet and then all of a sudden she snaps at me saying that she isn't a hotel or a B&B. I didn't even have time to answer that I was going to cover all the expenses"; "Don't message me if you are married, with children, or poor"; "We've been writing to each other for a month, discussed everything, I was about to buy tickets and suddenly she just disappears"; "She looked at me and started demanding alimony for the child that didn't even exist yet", "She turned up looking like a dance club goddess or a star of the Olympus, all dolled up, plastered, and I thought: what's wrong with you? do you want a child or what?", and other awkward moments. There is, however, a general opinion that if the donor and potential recipient manage to get past this stage and "get into action", they usually get along well.

Four interviewees consider having a contact with the future child as highly desirable or even necessary. Even though two of them are married with children, the same four respondents are ready to register as the child's legal father and consider the child their heir in all meanings of this word. Three respondents under no circumstances are ready to maintain contact with their future child, the rest leave it for the woman to decide.

Five respondents have already contributed to the birth of children by donating their gametes and maintain contact with them in different ways: "On the introduction website I met a woman, with whom we have an excellent friendly relationship and we've had two children together. However, I'll also be happy to have children from other women"; "I keep in touch with all the mothers. So far it has been easy—the

children are small and I come to see them, too. Older children already call me Daddy, their mothers say that I should come more often"; "I support all my women and children, including financially—there are feedbacks from the women", "I don't often see my son, but he knows that I am his father". Only one respondent involved his parents into the communication and upbringing of the children he fathered by donating: "They are just regular Grandma and Grandpa, who can take their grandkids for a weekend; my mother is very happy with this". This, however, concerns not all of his children but only two of them—a boy and a girl, born from two different women who were willing to maintain further contact. He comments that the women are acquainted with each other and their children know that they are a half-brother and half-sister: "They behave like ex-wives would, except for the fact that there are no grudges to hold, and I think my mother told her neighbours the same".

Four respondents are open about being sperm donors; four have special websites or groups in social media where they publish relevant and up-to-date information about themselves. One of them is married and his spouse approves of what he does because he uses only a "contactless method of insemination": "I told her that I am solely interested in leaving a large progeny, spread my genes, and she understands that it has nothing to do with infidelity". Three other respondents are formally married. One of them is ready to inform his wife if he fathers a child provided that he chooses to maintain contact with this child. Two others say that they don't want their wives to ever find out about it. Out of the remaining four respondents, to the question if they are going to tell their family members about their decision to donate, three said "no and I never will", and one said that he will act "depending on the circumstances". The majority of the respondents who wanted to stay anonymous as donors answered the question "Why do you hide this part of your life?", by claiming that their friends and family members "won't understand" them or said "I don't know who I can talk to about this". None of our respondents signed any contract with the recipients, except for the documents at the IVF clinic.

Motivations

The simplest motivation is the desire "to continue my lineage". These men, for different reasons, cannot satisfy this desire with their current partners ("This topic is considered closed in my family, with grown-up children and my wife already a grandmother") or they cannot do so due to the absence of a permanent partner ("I am not ready to start a family, I don't want to get married and I won't"). However, they are ready to officially acknowledge paternity, participate in the child's upbringing and make him or her their legal heir.

Moreover, some donors emphasize that they pursue altruistic motives: "I try to help people, I volunteer to search for missing persons and I help when I see an accident on the road, and I can help by donating"; "I do it because I can, in my inner circle of friends there was a couple who couldn't have children, I helped them and the first try was successful, I liked it"; "I feel like a certain kind of benefactor, it's no trouble for me to do it and I can make somebody happy".

Some of the respondents spoke of donation as an opportunity to pass over their genes and leave progeny: “Somebody has to contribute to this country’s gene pool”; “Procreation is a natural state of a man”; “It’s important for me to know that the children continuing my bloodline walk this Earth”, “I want to continue living in my children after I die, in them I live on and the more of them, the better”.

Many respondents emphasize that donating helps them make their life more meaningful: “I’m looking for some kind of meaning in everyday routines, giving somebody the gift of life is not a bad idea”; “I’ve achieved everything I wanted in life, now I’d like something else”; “Mothers are grateful to me, I see how my children are growing and it brings meaning to my life”.

Discussion

Although social advertising is used extensively in Russia, adverts urging men to donate sperm are still unimaginable. Therefore, private donors advertise their services online. Unlike the UK or Austria, for example, where “sperm donation involves typical commodity exchanges in unconstrained marketplaces” (Sobande et al., 2020, p. 71). Sperm banks are competing for donors and professional advertising agencies are employed to advertise services of this kind in top printed media and on television. The reasons why Russian donors go online are the same as for British donors: easy access, control over the situation and anonymity and opportunities for staying informed about the results of the process and keeping in touch with the resulting child (Freeman et al., 2016).

For our respondents, sperm donation in formal settings was unacceptable for different reasons. As Bossema et al. highlight, the reasons in favour of formal settings are predominantly concerned with what they refer to as “cautious motives” such as having “legal and physical protection, evading social consequences, and having a simple procedure in terms of effort and finances” (Bossema et al., 2014, p. 24). Donation through a fertility clinic is safer in terms of genetic disorder prevention; it also prevents unwanted paternal feelings or social disapproval by friends or recipient. This observation was confirmed by the results of our survey, whose participants reported having to face the negative reactions on the part of potential recipients and to deal with ethical problems in relation to their own families and partners. Reasons in favour of informal settings are described by the same authors as “approach motives”, that is, the ones “relating to procedural involvement and contact with the donor child and the recipient” (Bossema et al., 2014, p. 24).

It is interesting to compare a number of aspects in the experience reported by Russian and Canadian donors who took part in a similar survey (Lavoie et al., 2018).

The following similarities were identified:

- Both Russian and Canadian donors are not interested in the prospect of marrying a recipient woman and wish that the process of insemination be conducted on a neutral territory rather than in the recipient’s residence;
- In general, the donors are aware of the health implications associated with this practice and take their own health seriously, undergo regular medical check-ups and prefer insemination through donation rather than sexual intercourse.

All of the donors were quite well-informed about ART and were ready to consult potential recipients on these matters;

- Both Russian and Canadian donors consider donation a meaningful and satisfying experience but, with rare exceptions, are quite discreet about their donation experiences and are generally unwilling to share them with family or friends, preferring to stay anonymous.

There are also differences between the donors in Canada and Russia:

- The third of Russian donors (four out of eleven) consider the possibility of maintaining contact with the resulting offspring crucial, that is, they would like to perform the role of a father, even though it will happen outside of the traditional family setting. In contrast, all Canadian respondents agreed that “their role with regard to offspring was limited to genitor or biological father and that their involvement in the child’s daily life was neither expected nor wanted” (Lavoie et al., p. 194);
- Unlike Canadian donors, most of whom prefer to use some kind of a “contract” describing the rights and responsibilities of both parties, none of the Russian donors we interviewed reported signing any legal documents, apart from those required by the fertility clinic;
- Only Russian men discriminate potential recipients based on their social and/or marital status: some donors are ready to deal only with single and well-off women, some are interested only in family couples. Canadian donors appear to be much less demanding in this respect.

Regarding the motives behind men’s decision to donate their gametes, we can conclude that it requires a certain form of altruism, taking into account the amount of time and energy the donors have to invest (Bay et al., 2014).

Conclusions

Informal sperm donation is a relatively new phenomenon in Russia. As ARTs are becoming more popular and accessible and society more accepting to assisted reproduction, the demand for informal sperm donation is growing. One of the factors contributing to this demand is undoubtedly the Internet as digital platforms facilitating donor-recipient interactions are proliferating, thus providing a fast and cheap access to this service.

Participants in our survey admitted spending a large amount of time and resources on this activity while trying not to make this fact public. By their estimates, in total, they fathered nine children of their own and 47 were conceived through artificial insemination. One of our respondents remarked that “a private sperm donor has an IQ which, as a rule, significantly exceeds the average level”. His opinion is indirectly supported by the level of education of our respondents: only one of them has no higher education, two out of eleven hold two or more diplomas of higher education and two more have graduate degrees.

Although the majority of donors are single or have no permanent partner, none of them has the intention of marrying the mother of the resulting child or starting

a traditional family. Many would like to keep in touch with their children or already do so but only one of them has involved his family members into communication with the children and thus has created something resembling familial relationships. Others either avoid discussing the fact of fathering a child at all or inform their inner circle of this fact but prefer not to meet the child in their own homes and do not tell their family members about the details of these meetings.

Thus, in the established practices of informal sperm donation in Russia, men not only provide their genetic material but also spend time and invest considerable resources in procreation and further support of their offspring. At the same time these men are unwilling to start a family, which points to the fact that here we are dealing with a quite interesting phenomenon of extrafamilial reproduction. In this case, the respondents do not associate the parental project with traditional family and its values. In his seminal work *The Transformation of Intimacy*, A. Giddens (1992) noted that modernization processes are gradually changing the functions of the modern family. As a result of the rising female labour force participation, which started in the first third of the twentieth century, women became more capable of acquiring income of their own and could provide for themselves and their children, thus becoming more independent of men. Consequently, there was a reduction in the inequalities in the division of household labour and in the significance of the economic function of the family. After the sexual revolution of the 1960s, sexual relationships, which previously had been considered legitimate only within the strict boundaries of heterosexual marriage, became more socially acceptable. The stigma of shame was largely removed from sex, which led to more sexual freedom for women, with the exception of radical conservative circles. The development of birth control technologies made a substantial contribution to these trends, allowing women to defer pregnancy. Thus, the emotional and reproductive functions of the family were separated. The latter remained a solid bulwark of “family values” since childbirth and upbringing are still largely associated with heterosexual marriage and matrimony while pregnancy in marriage is still perceived as more socially acceptable than pregnancies out of wedlock. The development of ARTs, however, has led to significant social changes, and reproduction outside the family has started to be more widely practiced. Moreover, modern means of communication considerably facilitate this practice.

The majority of our respondents identify themselves as middle-income. They, however, do not see this fact as an obstacle to covering the expenses associated with donation and, in some cases, offering financial assistance to the recipient woman and resulting child.

Only one man decided to openly discuss his desire to donate sperm with his wife and to seek her agreement. The desire to stay anonymous, especially in the case of married men, raises the question of how ethical this situation is in relation to the donor's partner, who finds herself in a strange and dubious situation: although the contactless insemination method preferred by the majority of our respondents cannot be considered as sexual infidelity, their partners would still have to deal with the fact that these men have a second, “secret” life of their own.

The donors reported that the choice of the insemination method is determined by the degree of “informality” of the situation: they have to see for themselves that the mother of the resulting child is a normal, sensible person who would be able to raise a happy, healthy child; discuss the possibility of keeping in touch with the child in the future and maintain contact with him or her or, on the contrary, to make sure that they will be in no way legally bound to the child. We share the opinion of our Canadian colleagues in that “it would also be useful to study the views, experiences, and practices of recipients to gain a better understanding, in particular of the pathways that lead single women and couples (both lesbian and heterosexual) to publish online requests for donations” (Lavoie et al., 2018) and believe that further investigation in this sphere is necessary.

The methodological framework for this research also needs further elaboration: for example, it is necessary to clarify how to calculate and verify the number of children conceived from informal donors. Russian legislation does not regulate these practices in any way, although it is already obvious that matters of filiation created by informal donor conception and the need to keep count of the children born from this or that donor is becoming increasingly important.

References

- Agee, J. (2009). Developing qualitative research questions: a reflective process, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22(4), 431–447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390902736512>
- Bay, B., Larsen, P. B., Kesmodel, U. S., & Ingerslev, H. J. (2014). Danish sperm donors across three decades: motivations and attitudes. *Fertility and Sterility*, 101(1), 252–257. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fertnstert.2013.09.013>
- Blyth, E., & Frith, L. (2009). Donor-conceived people’s access to genetic and biographical history: an analysis of provisions in different jurisdictions permitting disclosure of donor identity. *International Journal of Law, Policy, and the Family*, 23(2), 174–191. <https://doi.org/10.1093/lawfam/ebp002>
- Bossema, E. R., Janssens, P. M. W., Treucker, R. G. L., Landwehr, F., van Duinen, K., Nap, A. W., & Geenen, R. (2014). An inventory of reasons for sperm donation in formal versus informal settings. *Human Fertility*, 17(1), 21–27. <https://doi.org/10.3109/14647273.2014.881561>
- Freeman, T., Jadvá, V., Tranfield, E., & Golombok, S. (2016). Online sperm donation: a survey of the demographic characteristics, motivations, preferences and experiences of sperm donors on a connection website. *Human Reproduction*, 31(9), 2082–2089. <https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dew166>
- Giddens, A. (1992). *The transformation of intimacy: sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies*. Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/72.1.271>
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press.

Health Canada. (2011, August 29). *Potential dangers of using donor semen from questionable sources*. Government of Canada. <http://healthycanadians.gc.ca/recall-alert-rappel-avis/hc-sc/2011/13536a-eng.php>

Kelly, F. (2009). (Re)forming parenthood: The assignment of legal parentage within planned lesbian families. *Ottawa Law Review*, 40, 185–222. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1683581>

Kelly, F. (2010). An alternative conception: The legality of home insemination under Canada's Assisted Human Reproduction Act. *Canadian Journal of Family Law*, 26(1), 149–170.

Lavoie, K., Côté, I., & de Montigny, F. (2018). Assisted reproduction in the digital age: Stories of Canadian sperm donors offering their gametes online via introduction websites. *Journal of Men's Studies*, 26(2), 184–202. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1060826517737047>

O poriadke ispol'zovaniia vspomogatel'nykh reproduktivnykh tekhnologii, protivopokazaniakh i ogranicheniiakh k ikh primeneniiu [On the procedure of the use of assisted reproduction technologies, contraindications and limitations of their application]. The Order of the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation No. 803H (2020, July 31). <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202010190041>

Polyakova, I.G. (2020). Sotsial'no-psikhologicheskii portret i osobennosti motivatsii donora spermy na bezvozmezdnoi osnove [Social-psychological profile and motivation of altruistic sperm donors]. *Tomsk State University Journal of Philosophy, Sociology and Political Science*, 56, 184–193. <https://doi.org/10.17223/1998863X/56/18>

Poupart, J. (2011). Tradition de Chicago et interactionnisme: des méthodes qualitatives à la sociologie de la déviance [The Chicago tradition and interactionism: Qualitative methods for a sociology of deviance]. *Recherches Qualitatives*, 30(1), 178–199.

Ravelingien, A., Provoost, V., & Pennings, G. (2016). Creating a family through connection websites and events: ethical and social issues. *Reproductive BioMedicine Online*, 33(4), 522–528. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rbmo.2016.07.004>

Riggs, D.W., & Russell, L. (2011). Characteristics of men willing to act as sperm donors in the context of identity-release legislation. *Human Reproduction*, 26(1), 266–272. <https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/deq314>

Ripper, M. (2008). Australian sperm donors: Public image and private motives of gay, bisexual and heterosexual donors. *Health Sociology Review*, 17(3), 313–325. <https://doi.org/10.5172/hesr.451.17.3.313>

Sobande, F., Mimoun, L., & Torres, L.T. (2020). Soldiers and superheroes needed! Masculine archetypes and constrained bodily commodification in the sperm donation market. *Marketing Theory*, 20(1), 65–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593119847250>